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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7520  
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE  
RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV IMMEDIATE 0827  
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC IMMEDIATE  
RHMFISS/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL IMMEDIATE  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE  
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS IMMEDIATE

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000959

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NEA/ELA  
TREASURY FOR GLASER/SZUBIN/LEBENSON  
NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/SINGH  
EB/ESC/TFS FOR SALOOM

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SUBJECT: SARG CHOOSES CONFRONTATIONAL STANCE IN MEETINGS  
WITH EU DELEGATION

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen Seche, reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) Diplomats at the EC mission in Damascus were quick to downplay the importance of the visit last week of EU parliamentarian and President of the Parliament's Delegation for Relations with the Mashrek, Beatrice Patrie. SARG dailies reported that Patrie met with both Abdallah Dardari, Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, and Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem to improve dialogue and pave the way for the completion of the Syria-EU Association Agreement. However, an economist at the mission, Fabrice Ferandes, stated that Patrie decided to visit Damascus only as an "add-on" to her trip to Lebanon, and that she held her meetings and returned to Beirut in the same evening. He described Patrie as being in "listening mode," which he said indicated a significant departure from her position last year when she visited Damascus as an advocate for the Partnership Agreement. Loic Lallemand Zeller, Political/Economic Chief at the EC Mission, stated that while Patrie and Dardari discussed the status of economic reforms in Syria, Patrie made it clear to both Dardari and Muallem that the EU Council of Ministers is no closer to finalizing the Agreement.

¶2. (C) The EC diplomats described Dardari and Muallem's position as confrontational, and stated that they used the meetings to emphasize that the SARG was placing less political and economic significance on completing the Agreement. According to Ferandes, Muallem told Patrie that Syria was not interested in pursuing the Agreement if the EU continued to put conditions on its completion, particularly in the realm of civil society. Dardari also made it clear that Syria did not need a completed Agreement to pursue its reform agenda at its own pace. In spite of the SARG position, and his claim that Patrie knew before her visit that the SARG was going to shut down the EC-funded Civil Society Training Center (septel), Ferandes stated that Patrie did not issue any stern statements. Patrie further indicated that the EU would continue ongoing technical assistance and capacity-building programs in line with the general framework of the Agreement, which is consistent with the EU's policy as described by the EC diplomats of furthering incremental reforms through engagement regardless of the obstacles.

¶3. (C) Comment: The EU is intent on pursuing a policy of engagement with Syria to the extent that the SARG will allow it. However, in previous meetings, the same EC diplomats

expressed their growing concern that the SARG, and Dardari in particular, is seeming more indifferent to participating in their development assistance programs. Muallam and Dardari's statements indicate that the SARG increasingly is willing to adopt a confrontational stance with the EU, and, perhaps because of its belief that the Association Agreement is dead on arrival, no longer sees it as a prize worthy of concessions.

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